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Resource Management Thrusts and Opportunities: BLM-Administered Public Lands

D. Dean Bibles

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Director Burford regrets that he could not be with you today. Congressional hearings have a high priority in our scheduling, so he's up on the Hill. Bob did want me to tell you about some of the actions we are taking relative to resource management on the public lands we administer, and how these actions influence wildlife and other renewable resources.

It is no surprise to most of us that the 80s are bringing some dramatic departures from past resource management practices, plus significant changes in emphasis.

Many of us learned early in our education or careers that the definition for conservation boiled down to wise use of natural resources. In fact, environment was then only a textbook word meaning the surroundings of a living organism. Unfortunately, there now seems to be a tendency to lump people who are interested in natural resources into one of four broad categories: either you're a *developer*, a *conservationist*, an *environmentalist*, or a *protectionist*.

Such generalities are naive and dangerous. But if such a narrow viewpoint was used to label BLM's natural resource philosophy, I would hope that the conservationist approach would be the choice.

However, we seldom deal in the luxury of simplistic generalities. There are lands under BLM jurisdiction where resource development should have more emphasis. These are lands that can help reduce America's dependence on foreign sources for oil and gas and strategic minerals. There are also areas where a protectionist philosophy should prevail.

But, for most of the lands we administer, aggressive management will be used to provide expanded resource use rather than favoring a more passive role of resource protection. In all we do, we hope to establish and maintain *balance*.

The "sagebrush rebellion" has helped us recognize that changes must and should be made in the management of public land and related resources. We are rapidly decentralizing our organizational structure from the top to the ground. Headquarters and state office personnel allocations are being substantially reduced to shift our capabilities to the District and Resource Area offices. This will increase our sensitivity to local needs and favor on-the-ground solutions to resource conflicts and problems.

And, in an effort to be more responsive to local needs, we are streamlining our procedures—inventory, data systems, planning, rights-of-way processing, State land selections, withdrawal review, and energy and mineral leasing. Without question, our top priority is fostering the production of energy and strategic minerals. This means improved access and simplified procedures to expedite exploration and development.

This does not mean that the Administration lacks concern for renewable resources. This concern, however, will be in the context of major national priorities such as national defense, energy self-sufficiency, and restoring a viable economy. The key

role of the public lands will be to contribute to domestic production of food and fiber; energy minerals; and to facilitate discoveries of non-energy minerals that are critical to our national well-being. Other uses, such as recreation and wildlife, will be woven into our plans for mineral development and rangeland management.

I see two major components in the current shift of management to the local scene and the corresponding decrease in Federal involvement. Reductions in Federal funding to try and reduce the heavy budget deficit are bound to continue over the short run. It is unrealistic to expect that any significant Federal funding will accompany the shift of responsibilities to the local land manager.

Second, a philosophy is emerging that those who benefit from public lands and resources should pay for those benefits.

In relating these factors to the Bureau's wildlife program, we look for an enlarged role by the State wildlife agencies. Under expanded State participation, you will see decreased Federal spending on habitat management overhead. This is happening now.

I can see the questions already forming—are we abdicating our statutory responsibilities to protect the fish and wildlife resources of the public lands? Definitely not! Our responsibilities for managing public land wildlife habitats, as spelled out in such legislation as the Sikes Act, the Public Rangelands Improvement Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, are fairly specific.

The potential impacts of other land-use activities will determine our priorities for wildlife over the short run. Where changes in wildlife habitat seem likely, our efforts will maintain the quality of such habitats or develop alternative habitat areas for those priority species involved.

We are improving our resource management planning by making the process more issue oriented—focusing toward locations where major land use actions are occurring and where wildlife or other resource needs, values, and conflicts are apparent.

As a major component of our wildlife inventories, we will continue to consult with the States for wildlife population data, and to cooperate in actual work leading to credible wildlife components of all Resource Management Plans.

The Resource Management Plan remains the basic vehicle for resolving wildlife conflicts with other public land uses, and for establishing wildlife objectives and priorities. Our wildlifery will provide technical representation for these plans, and strongly advocate wildlife needs and values in specific planning efforts. Other wildlife interests will also have opportunities for involvement in developing these plans.

Once a Resource Management Plan is approved and any subsequent resource development begins, increasing emphasis will be placed on monitoring to ensure that wildlife objectives are being met, and that wildlife stipulations and any mitigating measures are being followed in an effective manner. Through such monitoring, we will measure the effects of our management and make changes where needed.

We will also be working to enhance the habitat for priority species of wildlife through Habitat Management Plans, and through incorporating wildlife objectives in other activities such as livestock grazing, timber, mining, and rights-of-way. Priority in this case means those species having high economic, recreational, social,

aesthetic, or scientific values. These activity plans are developed and implemented under the authority of the Sikes Act in close cooperation with the States.

Several new policies affecting public land resources are now in the evolutionary stage. One of these is a new wildlife policy. Early drafts of this policy have been reviewed by the various States, conservation organizations, and user interests. Although basically a compilation of existing policies into one cohesive document, the Administration is carefully reviewing it, and when completed, it will represent the Administration's policies, philosophies and priorities regarding our wildlife habitat work. We expect this policy document to be approved shortly.

As most of you know, public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management were not covered by the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 changed this and we are taking a close look at about 24 million acres designated as Wilderness Study Areas. The Bureau recently issued its wilderness management policy, and some features of it affect the wildlife resource and our Federal-State responsibilities. A few of these are appropriate to discuss; however, the policies relate only to Congressionally-designated wilderness units:

- Wilderness management plans will specify wildlife habitat conditions to be maintained. Development of these plans will involve State wildlife people.
- Manipulation of vegetation to benefit wildlife may be approved by BLM State Directors.
- Habitat changes through chemical or mechanical means may be approved by State Directors when necessary to correct conditions caused by humans.
- Wildfire or prescribed burning may be authorized.
- Temporary facilities for trapping or transplanting of wildlife may be authorized.
- Under certain conditions, the Bureau may authorize permanent wildlife facilities such as watering places, enclosures, or stream improvements.

We are maintaining a strong commitment to protect threatened or endangered species and fully intend to use our various authorities to manage aggressively on behalf of such species.

In September 1981, Interior Solicitor Coldiron issued an opinion rescinding prior opinions that established those Federal appropriative water rights referred to as "non-reserved." The Solicitor concluded that the Federal government must acquire water as would any other private claimant within the various States.

A new Public Lands Water Rights Policy for livestock watering was subsequently issued by BLM in December 1981. Although this policy may have some spin-off effects on wildlife, it does not relate to water developed solely for wildlife purposes, nor does it affect Federal reserved water rights. We are analyzing the potential impacts of this policy on wildlife, fisheries, and recreation where State water laws fail to recognize these as beneficial uses of water.

A final policy on livestock grazing on the public lands was announced two weeks ago. Highlights of this policy include making grazing management more efficient and cost effective under the existing resource management planning system and classifying grazing allotments into one of three categories based on similar characteristics, management needs, and potential for improvement for both livestock and wildlife. Improving the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the grazing program within the planning system will allow us to use "selective management" in assigning management priorities among allotments within a planning area.

In carrying this philosophy even farther, grazing allotments would be categorized into those where we would manage to maintain a current satisfactory condition, manage to improve a current unsatisfactory condition, or manage at a custodial level while continuing to protect existing resource values. Funding will be mainly directed at those areas where a currently unsatisfactory condition can be improved significantly with a limited investment. The Bureau has also produced a Rangeland Improvement Policy that should become final any day now. It basically covers construction, funding, and maintenance of rangeland improvements. There would be more restrictive use of range betterment funds: Funds would be earmarked for on-the-ground work. We expect to avoid overhead and administrative cost charges to this fund. This Rangeland Improvement Policy would not affect wildlife project funds, the ways in which rangeland improvements can benefit wildlife, or our overall wildlife program operations.

A policy on the *maintenance* of rangeland improvements is not final, but the trend is to have range users carry part or all of the costs. There are also opportunities for wildlife and other conservation groups to become involved through construction of watering places and other habitat improvements.

The Bureau's resource management planning system is being reviewed to determine the need for amendments to the planning regulations. The basic thrust is to streamline the planning process so that decisions will not be delayed.

Proposed amendments were published last November and we are now developing final regulations based in part on the many well-developed comments that were received. The final rules will reflect consideration of the public comments and our objectives of shorter plan preparation time, lower planning costs, increased field manager authority, and simplified regulations that are easier to understand.

We are committed to assuring full public participation opportunities for wildlife and other interests as called for by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act.

Although increased local operational authority at our District and Area Office levels, and some relaxation of Bureauwide standards, might be seen as having potential for inconsistencies in the planning process, we are confident that close monitoring of significant resource actions will see that wildlife receives full consideration. The Bureau continues to emphasize wildlife programs and cooperation with State agencies under the Sikes Act. New policy initiatives call for increased cooperation and coordination with the Forest Service and their Sikes Act programs, including development of more statewide plans and long-range goals.

At the end of Fiscal Year 1981, BLM had prepared 194 Sikes Act Habitat Management Plans (HMPs) in 12 western States. These HMPs address on-the-ground habitat improvement, maintenance, and protection actions for more than 1600 miles of stream and almost 33 million acres of public land. Expenditures to date for Sikes Act Habitat Management Plans now totals nearly \$12 million. State agencies are working partners in these habitat plans, contributing manpower and money to the projects.

In summation, major changes are occurring that will affect the wildlife resources of the public lands. And with fewer Federal dollars or personnel, and emphasis on decentralization, the States face a bigger role concerning public land wildlife resources. It is also unlikely that Federal funds will be provided in support of this additional responsibility.

In June 1981, the Wildlife Management Institute completed an evaluation for

the Bureau's wildlife and fisheries program. BLM contracted with the Institute for this study. The report contained 36 recommendations for improving wildlife habitat management on the public lands. The main thrust of this evaluation's findings dealt with improving our coordination with State wildlife agencies, the Forest Service, other Federal agencies, and user interests. Other findings outlined constructive suggestions for improvements in the planning-NEPA processes, wildlife personnel training, personnel and organizational function, and stronger coordination between BLM's wildlife program and each of our other resource programs. Within constraints of funding and personnel ceilings, we are moving out with a plan to implement the Institute's recommendations. We have a limited number of copies of this report and, while they last, you can get one from the Bureau's Wildlife Division in Washington.

Management of public land wildlife resources is facing its greatest challenge. It will be a monumental task to provide for wildlife's needs and maintain a viable species diversity and abundance in view of the many conflicts and strong competition from other uses. I believe it can be done, but only through an appropriate emphasis on well-planned priorities, management innovations, and an even higher level of cooperation between the federal land managers, the State wildlife agencies, and the concerned private organizations and individuals.